



## Women's Charter

On 17 April 1954, fourteen months before the [Freedom Charter](#) was adopted in Kliptown on 26 June 1955, the Federation of South African Women adopted the Women's Charter (attached, and linked below).

Following on from what we have read in the last three weeks (from Zetkin, [Kollontai](#), Luxemburg, [Lenin](#), and the [Comintern](#)), we can see the same thread re-emerging

several decades later here in South Africa, as for example in this short passage from the Women's Charter:

*"We women do not form a society separate from the men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress."*

The Women's Charter was not directed against men; nor did it hold out women as a separate class of people as compared to the men. It opposed such a separation.

Thus it placed the question of women in the mainstream, and then it went on to say:

*"It is our intention to carry out a nation-wide programme of education that will bring home to the men and women of all national groups the realisation that freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are kept in bondage."*

It is very sad to read the following, from the women of 55 years ago, knowing that it is still as true today as it was then:

*"We know what it is to keep family life going in pondokkies and shanties, or in overcrowded one-room apartments. We know the bitterness of children taken to lawless ways, of daughters becoming unmarried mothers whilst still at school, of boys and girls growing up without*

*education, training or jobs at a living wage.”*

On the question of forms of organisation of women, a matter to which the CU will return in the next item of this part, the Women’s Charter as such has little to say, except for the following items from the list of demands:

- *For the removal of all laws that restrict free movement, that prevent or hinder the right of free association and activity in democratic organisations, and the right to participate in the work of these organisations.*
- *To build and strengthen women's sections in the National Liberatory movements, the organisation of women in trade unions, and through the peoples' varied organisation.*
- *To co-operate with all other organisations that have similar aims in South Africa as well as throughout the world.*

The 1954 Women’s Charter was non-committal on the question of women’s organisation. This was perhaps a sign that the matter was already controversial within the liberation movement. The ANC Women’s League had been founded in 1948; we will see in later sessions that the ANC WL had its way in the 1950s and again in the 1990s and in the 2000s, obstructing the growth of a general women’s democratic mass movement.

The Women’s Charter of 1954 stands as a monument to South

African women's determination to organise independently as women, but this is an aspiration that has yet to be realised.

[The image above is of a 1987 FEDSAW Western Cape poster, made during a period of attempted revival of the organisation]

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Women's Charter, FEDSAW Founding Conference, 1954.](#)
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